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THE SIEGE OF SVETIGRAD ('SAINT-CITY')

1448/1449



Skopje, Macedonia 2016

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Скандер-бег

Foreword: In 15th century the medieval feudalism across Europe was ending. But, not in the Macedonian Peninsula. It was a period of continuous disturbance and great woe. The central powers were unable to assert order above the local warlords quarrels, and Europe was fragmented by the rule of local lords. With no supervision or direction they were fighting endless wars between them, without conclusion. The central-southern area of Macedonian Peninsula was no different, divided in many small kingdoms and principalities that occasionally fought between them. On top of that the Macedonian Peninsula (“Balkan” as of 19th century) was invaded and ravaged by last in the row of invading barbarous tribes from east, the Seljuk Turks. Under the Osman (anglicized ‘Ottoman’) dynasty they were conquering Europe through the Macedonian Peninsula (i.e. “Balkans”), Iberian Peninsula (i.e. “Spain”), and Sicily...



The Turk hordes poured into the Macedonian Peninsula already in the 14th century, and although the Romeian Empire and its holy capital Constantinople managed to withstand their attacks until 1453, they gradually conquered one by one all those small Macedonic kingdoms and divided among them principalities. Nevertheless, 15th century still saw many of them fighting fiercely and rebelling for freedom from Turkish tyranny. One of these were the mountainous Macedonian principalities of Debar and Mat (or Matia) in Western Macedonia (today northern Albania), ruled by George “Skanderbeg”

Kastriot. These isolated highlands in Macedonian Peninsula were resisting successfully the Turkish raids for so long thanks also to the financial and material support which they continuously received from their Christian allies across the Adriatic Sea, namely, the Spanish Aragon dynasty, Venetians, Ragusans, and the Pope. Thus, after many failed Ottoman incursions in western Macedonia, Turkish sultan Murat II decided to march a large army into Skanderbeg's dominions, in order to capture one of the key Macedonian strongholds, the fortress of Svetigrad.

The citadel of Svetigrad was one of the last Macedonian strongholds and a bastion of Christianity in western Macedonia. Its very name underlines that fact - "Svetigrad" means the 'Holy-city' or "Saint-city" in plain Macedonian. It was most probably ubiquitous to what was known as a strong fortress already in the ancient times, under the name of 'Uscana', a place where the last Macedonian king from the Argead dynasty, Persei (Lat. *Perseus*) of Macedon, won a great victory against the invading Romans in 170 BCE. Namely, the king Persei marched with his Macedonian Falankas (lat. *Phalanx*) toward the fortres of Uscana in the first half of the 2nd century BCE. The Romans, helped by irregulars from various Gaul-Illyrian tribes in Matia and Dalmatia, succeeded in occupying the western Macedonian city-fortress of Uscana in the Third Macedonian-Roman War (171-168 BCE).¹ Thus, in the winter of 170/169 BCE the Macedonian king Persei responded swiftly by moving with his army from Stubera (lat. *Stybera*, today *Chepigovo*) in Pelagonia plain, toward the region of *Penestia* in the westernmost Upper Macedonia, in order to put an end to the Roman occupation of this important fortified city. The combined force of 4000 Roman soldiers and 500 Gaul/Illyrian tribesmen were no mach for the Macedonian Army of 10.000 Falanka infantry, 2000 light infantry and 500 Macedonian Royal Companions cavalry. After short and futile resistance Romans negotiated a disarmed retreat, while the Gaul/Illyrian marauders were captured and sold as slaves. The Macedonian garison at the Uscana stronghold was restored again, and the city was additionally fortified by Persei.

After several centuries of natural and human disasters and devastations that followed, the early 4th century marked a new era in the development of ancient Uscana and its surroundings. Since Constantine I the Great with the 'Edict of Milan' in AD 313 granted religious freedom to Christianity, many towns all over the then Roman empire became important religious centers, and the old fortress-town of Uscana was one among them. As part of the Diocese of Macedonia the whole Debar region was rebuilt and arranged with churches and basilicas. For example, under the monastery of St. George in the village of Knežino near Kičevo, in 1985 several older church buildings have been discovered, the oldest one dated exactly in the Early Christian period (4th-5th c.).² Today nearby village *Kodžadžik* is also famous for the fact that the natal house of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's³ was located in the village. A memorial house of Kemal Atatürk has been recently constructed in the same place.

Seventeen centuries after the Macedonian-Roman Wars, Uscana, now renamed into 'Svetigrad', was again an important Macedonian stronghold in front of the foreign invaders, this time against the Turk hordes from the east. It lies in the Zhupa region, between Debar and Struga, in the western parts of today R. of Macedonia. It was placed at a very rocky crest and in a very strategic favorable position,

¹ Titus Lyvius "History of Rome"

² G.S. Dimitrioska, "Monastery complex of St. George - Knežino", *MAA*, 307-321, 307.

³ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), born in Macedonia, was a Turkish army officer, revolutionary, and founder of the modern Republic of Turkey, serving as its first president from 1923 until his death in 1938. His surname, Atatürk (meaning "Father of the Turks"), was granted to him in 1934 and forbidden to any other person by the Turkish parliament.

controlling the road through the Drim i Župa valley. This is a very important road, which connects the two most important transmacedonic roman roads: the ancient via Egnatia (Ohrid basin), and the Lissus-Naissus on the north (Kukeš basin). Being the northern branch of via Egnatia, the Drin i Župa road was the very strategic corridor through the prehistoric times to nowadays.

At Svetigrad's fortress there are some traces of its inhabitation since the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, as well as the late antiquity period and the medieval ones. There are some parts of its late antiquity period and medieval fortification system on the upper platform of its even rocking surface. The flat surface has a polygonal plan with perimeter 145m, 58 m long and 34 m wide, and the total surface of the fortified area measures nearly 1600 m². The walls follow the lines (contours) of the crest, except the southern side, including within the defensive surface two narrow terraces with good dwelling conditions. The wall avails the defense capacities of the rocking crest, somewhere including in its structure the natural rock, or interrupting itself where its slopes are rocky or very steep ones. The nowadays wall's remnants consist of 7 tracts of the surrounding walls, respectively 2 m, 3.5 m, 6 m, 2.10m, 9 m, 6 m and 22 m long, and its seeing perimeter 50.60 m. The wall of the late antiquity period is actually the earliest fortification of Svetigrad's stronghold. It could be seen in the outer rampart line of its tower. It had been built with natural and river stones embedded with limestone mortar, by *opus incertum* technique. The castle had nearly been rebuilt in medieval period, by reconstructing the damaged parts and also the new ramparts were built-up. To the medieval period belong all the remains tracts, 50.60 m long in generally, including the outer second wall of the tower. Their height moves from 1.00 m to 2.5-3m, whereas their width moves from 1.40 to 1.70m. A similar width of surrounding walls have already been seen in some other medieval castles of Albania, such as the castle of Kruja, Shurdhahu (near Scodra), Daula (Kurbin), Stelushi (Diber-Matia), Guri i Bardhë (i.e. Petralba, or "White Stone"), etc. In the chronological viewpoint, the medieval fortification of Svetigrad's stronghold belongs to the 14-15 centuries AD. To this period conforms the technique of building of the surrounding walls, their narrow width, the technique features of the mortar determined by the limestone, the using of the iron building scaffold, etc. To the medieval pre-ottoman period of the 14-15 centuries AD belong nearly all the fragments of vessels founded on this castle and its surrounding varosh (suburb).

Thus, the Svetigrad fortress lays on an important route (near today *Kodžadžik*) between central Macedonia and western Macedonian region of Matia (Mat), and its occupation would've give the invading Ottomans easy access into the western parts of Macedonia (Matia) and further toward the Adriatic coast.

But, the things weren't going so smooth for the Turks either. In 1440 John Hunyadi became the trusted adviser and most highly regarded warlord of the king Władysław III of Poland. Hunyadi was rewarded with the captaincy of the fortress of Belgrade, and was put in charge of military operations against the Ottomans. King Władysław recognized Hunyadi's merits by granting him estates in Eastern Hungary. Hunyadi soon showed and displayed an extraordinary capacity to marshal his defences with the limited resources at his disposal. He was victorious in Semendria over Isak-Beg in 1441. Not far from Nagyszeben in Transylvania he annihilated an Ottoman force and recovered for Hungary the suzerainty of Wallachia. In July 1442 at the Iron Gates he defeated a massed Ottoman formation of 80,000 men led by Sehabbedin Pasha.

These victories made Hunyadi a prominent enemy of the Ottomans and renowned throughout Christendom, and were prime motivators for him to undertake in 1443, along with King Władysław, the expedition which became known as the "Long Campaign", with the Battle of Niš as one of the main battles of this campaign. Hunyadi was accompanied by the cardinal Julian Cesarini,

and the Duke of Raška Đurađ Branković during this campaign. The Cristian army consisted of 25,000 or more troops and 600 war wagons. Hunyadi took 12,000 cavalry to locate and defeat Kasim Pasha. King Władysław and Duke Branković were left in camp with the war wagons.

Right in 1443 Hunyadi, at the head of the vanguard, crossed the Macedonian Peninsula through the Gate of Trajan. At the Battle of Niš (or Nish) in the early November 1443, he defeated three armies of the Ottoman Empire. The Christian army led by John Hunyadi, captured the Ottoman stronghold of Nish (or Niš) in the then Raška region. Thenafter he captured Sofia too, and defeated Sultan Murat II at Snaim (Kuštinitza). But, the impatience of the king and the severity of the winter then compelled him (in February 1444) to return home, but not before he had utterly broken the Sultan's power in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Western Macedonia, Kosovo & Metohia, and Matia.

As expected, Macedonian and other local warlords rose to arms against the Turks as well. The short void of power that was created after the incursion of Hunyadi gave them a new hope and unexpected opportunity to gain upper hand over the Turks. Thus, the rebellion was result of initial Christian victories in the Hunyadi crusade in 1443. Skanderbeg, then already a Sanjak-beg (“landlord” in Turkish)⁴ of the Sanjak of Debar, mistakenly believed that Christians will succeed to push Ottomans out of Europe. Like many other regional Ottoman officials, he deserted Turkish army to rise rebellion in his Sanjak of Debar and surrounding regions.



Christian confederation known as “The League of Leshi”⁵ was formed in 1444, and it was a confederation of Dalmatian, Matian, Debar, and other Macedonian regions komites and voivodas

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanjak-bey>

⁵ The name of the city of ‘Leshi’ on the Adriatic coast in the region of Matia (today northern “Albania”) means ‘a corpse’, cadaver, “Lesh” in plain Macedonian; also known by the corrupted

(‘chieftains’ and ‘warlords’). For the Coat of Arms of the League was taken the Romeian imperial two-headed Christian eagle, and the inscription “*Macedonia and Albania*”⁶. Headed by the Macedonian prince and ingenious military commander, ‘the best among the equals’ - George “Skander-beg” Kastriot, it continued to cause great disturbance to the Turks invaders, which in 1444 were once more heavily defeated at the battle of the city of Torvioll (today ‘*Peshkopeia*’). Further, encouraged by initial great success against Ottomans, Skanderbeg launched a series of assaults deeper in the central Turkish-occupied Macedonian territories, until he reached Skopje further east. Thus, his small Macedonian army halted the tide and created a firm obstacle for the Turks on their way further north.

The response by the Turks wasn’t to be awaited very long. Sultan Murat II gathered another large Turk army, and was now marching against Svetigrad and the new confederation of Macedonian warlords. The force for this campaign prepared by Murat II was the largest force with which the Ottomans had ever attacked Skander-beg. Murat planned to take the fortress, march into the western Macedonia interior, and capture the main citadel of Kruša (today *Kruje*), thus crushing the Venetian-supported Macedonian League. The siege of Svetigrad began on May 14, 1448 when an Ottoman army led by sultan Murat II surrounded the fortress of Svetigrad. At the same time Skanderbeg engaged into war against his former ally Venice. This was due to the Republic of Venice treason toward the Macedonian League in this critical moment, and consequently Skanderbeg’s decision to break off his subservient position in the informal alliance with the treacherous Venetians.

Realizing the magnitude of the challenge, Skanderbeg attempted to relieve the garrison of Svetigrad by engaging in skirmishes with the Ottoman army. His forces succeeded in inflicting heavy casualties on the Turkish forces through guerrilla-style attacks. Efforts were made by Skander-beg to use intelligence forces, operating as far as Constantinople, to gather information on Murat's plans of action.

Meanwhile, near Skadar (*Škodra*, *Scutari*)⁷ he had been able to defeat a Venetian force and managed to considerably weaken the Venetian presence in Matia.

Latin form of its name: ‘*Alessio*’, and in the 19th century as ‘*Alise*’, ‘*Lissus*’, ‘*Leshi*’, or ‘*Mrtav*’ (from Catholic Encyclopedia).

⁶ “*Albania*”, meaning ‘the land of the Dawn’ (‘*Alba*’ in Italian), same like Roman “*Illyria*” is just another Italian/Venetian-given exonym, totally unknown to the local population whatsoever.

⁷ the name of the city and lake Skadar, also “*Scutari*” or “*Škodra*” [archaic] means ‘*stork*’ in plain Macedonic; see also “*Škoda*”, the brand name of famous Czech car producer. Namely, even today the shallow lake Skadar is literary swarmed by storks.

The prelude to the siege

In 1444 the major komites and voivodas (warlords) of the western Macedonian duchies and principalities, which up to that point had been vassals of the Ottoman empire and/or Venetians and Ragusans, united and formed the League of Leshi (lat. *Lissus*, *Alessio*, *Lezhe*, etc.)⁸. Among the Macedonian nobles that attended the formation of the league were George Arianitski, Paul Dukagjini, Atanas Thopia, Aleksander ‘Leko’ Dushmani (i.e. “Enemy” in plain Turkish), Todor Kruna, Petar Spani, Aleksandar ‘Leko’⁹ Zaharia, and Paul ‘Strez’¹⁰ Balshić. For the Chelnik (leader) of the confederation was chosen George ‘Skanderbeg’ Kastriot of Kruša.



Above: the modern Coat of Arms of the city of Lesh (*Leche*, *Lezhe*, *Lissus*)

Thus, to fight the Turk invaders they formed a large Macedonian confederation under command of one of the greatest medieval Macedonian heroes and freedom fighters, George “Skander-beg” Kastriot, in Cyrillic: *Горѓе Скандербег Кастриот*; his full name in Old Macedonic Cyrillic in 1450 was written as “Ђурђѣ Кастриот” – ‘*Durađ Kastriot*’ (the Italian form of his surname is ‘*Castrioti*’, and also as ‘*Castriothi*’ in 1408; rendered later in modern Albanian historiography as ‘*Kastrioti*’.¹¹ Charles du Fresne 1610–1688, writing in Latin, used ‘*Georgius Castriotus Scanderbegus*’ in his work. C.C. Moore in his biographical work on Skanderbeg (1850) used *Castriot*.

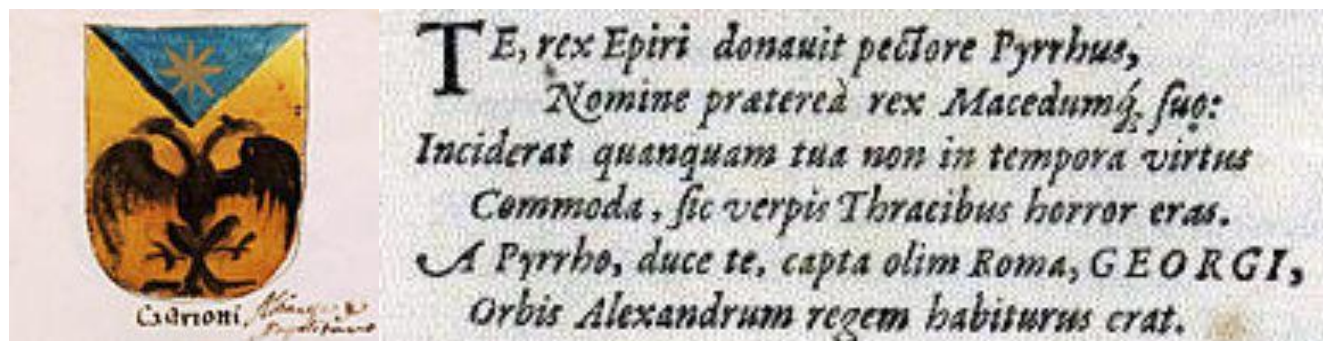
⁸ The name of the city of ‘Leshi’ on the Adriatic coast in the region of Matia (today northern “Albania”) has two possible etymological explanations: or it’s connected to the Macedonic forest spirit or forest god (*Leši*, *Lesse*, *Veles* - also a city in Macedonia), or simply means ‘a corpse’, ‘cadaver’ - “Lesh” in plain Macedonian.

⁹ “Leko” is common Macedonic diminutive of the name Alexander.

¹⁰ “Strez” - a medieval title in Macedonia; a *Herzog*; ‘liege lord’, vassal governor of a small region. In the states where there were kings they were regularly the military commanders.

¹¹ *Gjergj* is also the modern Albanized version of the actual name *George*.

George ‘Skanderbeg’ Kastriot was born on 6 of May 1405 in the city of Debar, today western Republic of Macedonia, Of a noble Christian Macedonian family¹² as a kid he was given as a guarantee of the peace treaty stipulated by his father John with the Turks in 1421, and he was sent to serve in the dreaded Janičari corps (Turkish: “Yani-çari” - ‘*Young troops*’) and was in military service in the city of Adrianopol. After brilliant military career, and after exerting even a diplomatic function in the Russo-Turkish negotiations, at some point (after the big defeat of the Turks at the Battle of Niš) he deserted from the Turkish army and returned to his family in Matia.¹³ This was also due to his national awakening, while he as Macedonian was participating as translator in the Russo-Turkish negotiations. He was impressed by the grandeur and power of the Russian state, which provoked a bitter rancor to him, as a Macedonian in service of his own tyrant. Thus, he deserted and decided instead to fight his former masters, the Turkish invaders that usurped his homeland. From then on he fought the Turks fearlessly, and with so much ardor that in his time he earned the nickname “Skander-beg” - ‘*Alexander-lord*’, as the Turks called him because of the stunning vehemence and fierce boldness of his attacks with which he terrorized them. According to Turks Skanderbeg military stratagems were comparable only to one another Macedonian - Alexander the Great. Skanderbeg rather compared himself to Pyrrhus of antiquity who marched into Italy to defend the Macedonian city-states from Roman expansion. The Macedonians, for not so noble reasons, nicknamed him “*Kastriot*” (which wasn’t his surname at all) i.e. “*The castrated one*”, due to the fact that all Janissary children recruits were forcibly islamized, thus circumcised (i.e. ‘*castrated*’¹⁴), so, among equals they jokingly called him ‘Kastriot’.



Above: the Coat of Arms of George 'Skanderbeg' Kastriot, “Rex Macedum”, as recorded by Angelo Maria da Bologni in 1715 - Sable twoheaded Eastern Christian imperial eagle on yellow background, with above insert of blue triangle field and Macedonic royal star

¹² Skanderbeg's father was Jovan (i.e. John; his grandfather Paul, grand-grandfather Komnen, grand-grand-grandfather Branilo – all of which are Macedonian names), from the village of Sinai near Debar, a landlord of a province that included Matia, Mirdite and Debar in today northern and central Albania and western Macedonia. His mother was Voisava, from the Polog valley (today northwestern Republic of Macedonia), from the village of Gradec near Gostivar (R. of Macedonia), she was a Macedonian princess from the Branković dynasty. George was the youngest son, his older brothers were Staniša, Repoš and Kostandin, and his sisters were Mara, Jelena, Angelina, Vlaica and Mamica (all typically Macedonic names).

¹³ Skanderbeg deserted the army of Murat II in early November 1443, during the Battle of Niš, while fighting against the crusaders of John Hunyadi. According to some earlier sources, Skanderbeg deserted the Ottoman army during the Battle of Kunovitsa on 2 January 1444, Skanderbeg quit the field along with other 300 Macedonians serving in the Ottoman army.

¹⁴ from the Macedonic verb “*Kastri*” - cutting, cropping (Lat. *Castrare*).

Skanderbeg also participated with his military expedition in the Franco-Spanish Italian War (1460-1462) on the side of his ally the Spanish king Ferdinand I of Naples. This was due to his rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, since 1443, when he allied with several Western European monarchs in order to obtain assistance and to consolidate his domains. To repay his debt toward Alfonso (Ferdinand's I father) for the financial and military assistance given to him in the years before, Skanderbeg took up the pope's pleas to help out Alfonso's son by sending a military expedition of 500 Macedonian cavalry to Italy. This ties with the papal state and other western kingdoms also says a lot about his religious affiliation. Although it is presumed that he was of Orthodox Christian credo¹⁵, because the region of Matia was still part of the Diocese of Macedonia (Orosh eparchy, bound to Ohrid Archiepiscopacy), it is noted that he was in close relationship with the Catholic church too. Also, both pope Calixtus II and his successor Pius II supported him financially, while planning a crusade against Turks. Because of his merits in the war against the Turks pope Calixtus even gave to Skanderbeg the title Captain-General of the Curia.¹⁶



Above: the portraits of Skanderbeg and his wife Donka

Furthermore, already Skanderbeg's father Jovan had gained privileges and relations with the Republic of Ragusa and the Republic of Venice. In 1438 and 1439, Skanderbeg, together with his brother Staniša, continued to sustain his father's relations with those states. Thus, he also signed an alliance with Venice, which has been preparing for war against the Ottomans. In order to reinforce his

¹⁵ Both his father Jovan and his brother Repoš, who served as monk there, are buried in the Holy Mountain (Sveta Gora) monastery of Hilendar.

¹⁶ the papal court at the Vatican, by which the Roman Catholic Church is governed. It comprises various Congregations, Tribunals, and other commissions and departments.

ambitions, and to boost this shaky alliance, Skanderbeg seized the Shat fortress from a local Turkish vassal and presented it as a gift to Venice. On their side, seeing that southern Italy was locked in feud conflict Venice no longer feared that Aragonese-Matian alliance will pose them a threat to act more deliberately, and the Senate decided to take a friendlier approach in Venetian relations with Skanderbeg's principality.



Above: another illustration of the Coat of Arms of George 'Skanderbeg' Castriot, as recorded in the Illyrian Armorial (Society of Antiquaries of London MS.54)¹⁷

¹⁷ <http://archive.is/20130116051211/www.academicmicroforms.com/illyrian-armorial.html>

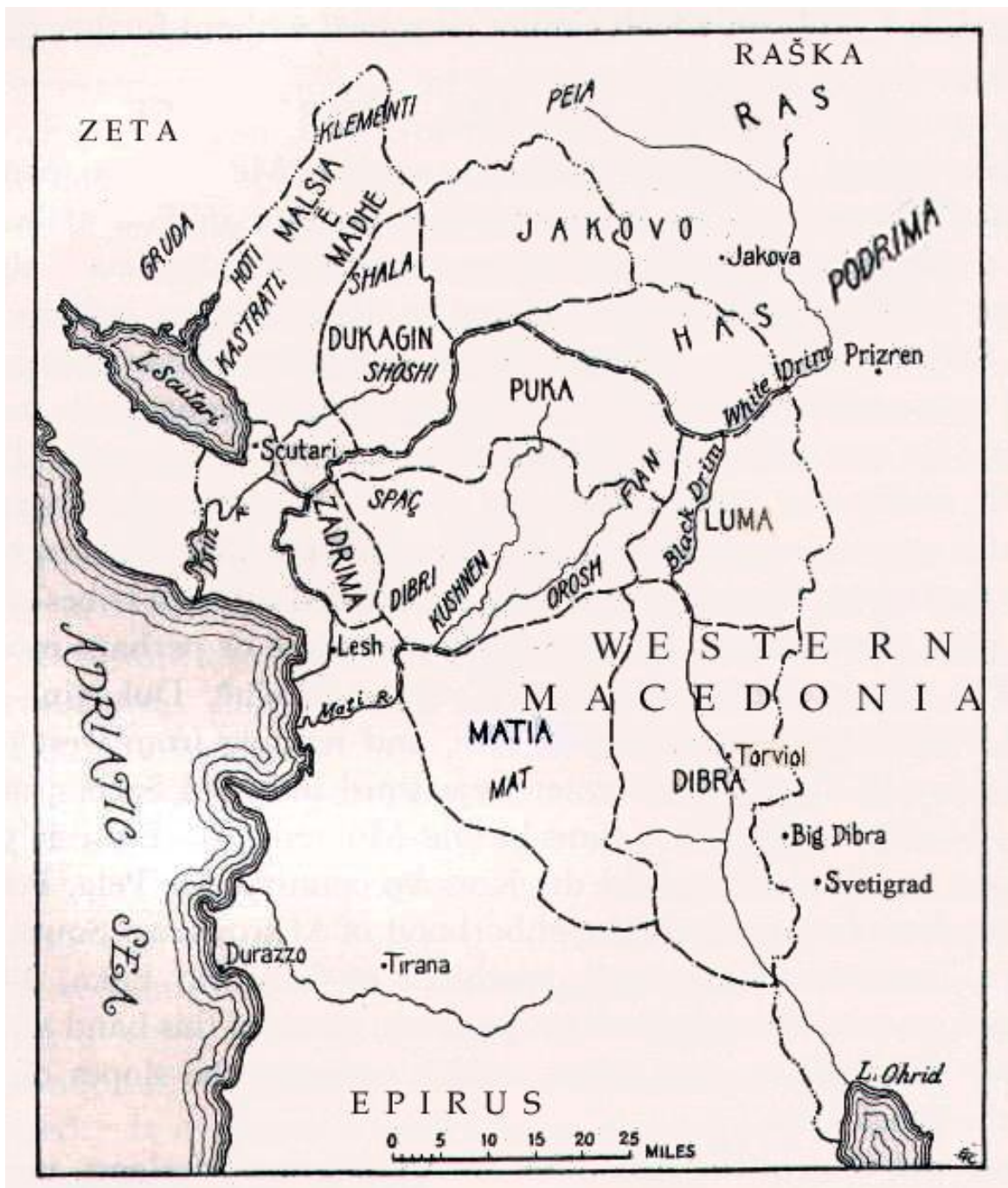
When Skanderbeg finally established an alliance with Venice he immediately used it against Dukagjini, a local landlord that was strengthening an alliance with the Turks. Even the pope issued a bull against Dukagjini, giving him 15 days to break his alliance with the Ottomans and to reconcile with Skanderbeg, or be subject to interdiction. Dukagjini conceded and chose the Macedonian option. He then reestablished his alliance with Skanderbeg and Venice, and accepted all of its losses.

The League of Leshi was actually formed under the Venetian patronage and motivated by their regional economic interests western Macedonia. The Skanderbeg military campaign against his former masters started in March 1444, when under his leadership, in just 12 days and in two major battles - at Konyuh (today *Elbasan*) and Belgrad (today *Berat*), the region of Matia (or Mat, along the homonymous river)¹⁸ and parts in Upper Debar region with Svetigrad, were liberated from the Turkish yoke. Then after Skanderbeg attacked the Turks near Skopje, where according to sources he slew to death some 1,700 Turks. This event was perceived with bitter awe by the Turks, and they immediately sought to put an end of the rebellion with army force of some 40,000 soldiers sent from Odrin. At the end of June 1444, under command of Ali-pasha, the Turkish army headed toward the Debar region in order to attack the city of Svetigrad. But, they were unexpectedly engaged in open battle in the Debar field near the Torvioll, and then directly attacked by Skanderbeg's 12,000 strongmen. By lightning-strikes of the small but lethal Macedonian battle groups Turks suffered great losses. Then Skanderbeg, in the same fashion as his ancient predecessor Filip II of Macedon, exploiting Ali Pasha's disdain for the Macedonian army, lured into a trap the Turks by making it appear he was at a terrain disadvantage. Like Filip II he managed to trick the Turks by faking a retreat on one of his flanks. This was enough to dislocate the frontline of the Ottoman attack and then to concentrate a superior Macedonian force attack at a specific weakened point on the battlefield, in the same way as the Filip's son Alexander the Great did in the field of Chaeronea in 338 BCE. The Turk lines crushed under the sudden fierce charge of Macedonians and they couldn't escape their ill fate. In Turkish chronicles from that time is noted: "*Skanderbeg cut-off all the exits and all the roads were blocked by insurmountable obstacles.*" The battle lasted just three hours, and Turks suffered a major defeat and lost some 30,000 men¹⁹, which remained slain on the battlefield.

This event caused even greater rancor and dread among the Turks. All the Ottoman expeditions into western Macedonia that followed after had failed, and as a result of all this the Ottomans abandoned their plans for major invasion on Hungary, and sought to crush the League of Leshi and re-establish the control over western parts of Macedonia, Matia and Epirus. Sultan Murat II chose to personally lead a major army force through Macedonian territory in order to defeat and conquer these rebel Macedonian principalities. Thus, the sultan decided first to capture the fortress and local city of Svetigrad (Saint-city), which stood on his way to Matia and Epirus. This invincible fortress served as spiritual center and a strategic outpost for protection of the Macedonian western regions as from the antiquity, while also allowing the Macedonians to launch their own assaults in the eastern Turk-occupied Macedonian territories.

¹⁸ *Mat* or *Matka*, river in today central-northern Albania. The same Macedonian name is also used for the famous canyon Matka on the river Treska near Skopje, today capital city of Republic of Macedonia.

¹⁹ The number of casualties is probably exaggerated, but that's the number reported by different medieval sources.



Above: a map showing Western Macedonia and the region of Matia (*Mat*). Note the typical Macedonic pair-named toponyms: Has - Ras (principality of Raška), Podrima - Zadrimea (respectively “Along the Drim” and “Behind the Drim”)²⁰, Black Drim - White Drim (the rivers), Dibri - Dibra, Matia - Dalmatia (in northwest), etc.

²⁰ This toponym explicitly shows through its etymological logic the original topographic and regional perspective - from the central Macedonian inland toward its western periphery in this case, thus from “Podrima” - ‘along the (river) Drim’ where it flows from, toward the “Zadrimea” - ‘behind the (river) Drim’.

In that moment, in order to skip a new direct war with Turks, perfidious Venetians betrayed the League of Leshi. By turning their backs on the Macedonians, exactly when Murat II launched a decisive military operation, they left Skanderbeg and his komites and voivodas to confront the Turks virtually alone. So, unexpectedly, in the late 1447 also a conflict between Venice and the League of Leshi broke, but had not yet escalated into full-scale confrontation. Skanderbeg wasn't happy at all with the betrayal and had declared war on Venice as a result of a diplomatic impasse. It showed that the Venetians weren't any different from the Turks in their objectives toward the League of Leshi, and like the Turks they wanted to make Skanderbeg their vassal and his brave komites and voivodas Venetian servants. Thus Skanderbeg responded enraged by confronting the Venetians too. But, this left him vulnerable from the east.

In 1448 Macedonian spies informed Skanderbeg about the movements of the large Ottoman army that was preparing to march through Macedonia. By some sources the number of the Turks was reported as being as high as 170,000. However, this army is likely to have contained no more than 80,000 soldiers.



Murat II soon marched his huge army to city of Bitola, accompanied by his son Mehmed II. Skanderbeg urgently recalled for material and military aid Venice. The answer, as we know, was negative. Instead, the only aid received came from the Spanish kingdom of Naples and the Ragusans. Murat further marched into Ohrid, and along the valley of Black Drim river was approaching Svetigrad. In response, Skanderbeg strengthened the garrisons of Kruša, Stellusha, Svetigrad and Belgrad (today "Berat") by ordering the populations around these fortresses to take up arms. The count of Gyurritsa

persuaded Skanderbeg to incorporate a scorched earth strategy, by destroying all supplies that might be used by the Ottoman army.

Shortly before the Ottoman siege began, Skander-beg positioned himself, with 8000 foot soldiers and 4000 cavalry, 7 miles (11 km) from the Turkish camp. He ordered that no campfires should be lit in order to keep his position secret. The great voivodas Moisie 'Golemi' (i.e. 'The Great') of Debar and Muzaka of Angelina were ordered, with thirty horsemen, to dress as peasants and try to enter the fortress. The plot was discovered and the company was attacked, but the attackers were driven off by the brave Macedonian fighters. In that moment, upon returning to the main Ottoman camp, one of the commanding pashas saw that this was one of Skanderbeg's plots and sent his 4,000 horsemen to find out where Skanderbeg was camping by following Moisie's band. Moisie led the Ottoman force straight into a valley where Skanderbeg, who was ready for such an enterprise, surrounded the valley with his forces waiting promptly the Turkish horsemen. When the Ottoman force was within distance, the Macedonians sprung the ambush and the Ottoman force was annihilated. This happened on May 14, 1448, after which Murat II ordered the siege to begin.





Above: a portrait of the great voivoda Moisie Golemi (the Great) of Debar

The Siege

Ottoman arrival. - Murat's force contained approximately 80,000 men and two cannons, which could fire 200 pounds (91 kg) cannon balls. His army also contained a fresh corps of Janissaries, and 3000 debtors and bankrupts obligated to fight in order to regain their freedom. However, the bulk of the Murat II army was inexperienced in battle and poorly motivated for fight. On the other side, in charge of the Svetigrad defenses was the experienced voivoda (i.e. 'warlord') Petar "Perlati" (the 'Conveyed' in Latin), a renown Macedonian chieftain with some 3000 strong men. The other forces of defenders were divided in skirmisher bands of Macedonian horsemen, and they were following at safe distance the movements of the Turkish forces. All in all, it was estimated that some 15,000 Macedonians faced 80,000 strong Turks. At first the Ottoman force paraded around the fortress and offered 300,000 aspras (Turkish currency) to those who would open the gate and let the Ottoman army in the fortress without a fight. After no one on the side of Macedonians was impressed by the movements, the heralds proposing these offers went into the fortress in the evening, and the garrison commanders gave them a splendid dinner, so that they would get the impression that the enemy was well prepared for a lengthy siege. After the dinner their offers were rejected and they were sent back to the sultan.



Above: **Macedonian foot soldiers and horsemen from 15th century**

The size of the Ottoman army troubled Skanderbeg because of the effects it could have on the morale of his soldiers, and on the local population which supported the fighters. Skanderbeg thus moved from village to village, disguised as a common soldier, and invoked the fighting spirit of the population. As a result of this activity, even if heavily outnumbered, the local chieftains agreed to fight the Turks, and in change managed to persuade Skanderbeg to draw up his plans in concert with theirs.

Macedonian guerrilla attacks

To relieve the garrison of Svetigrad, Skanderbeg continually harassed the Turkish army. Many of these attacks had been surprise ambushes of isolated Ottoman forces. Hoping to evade Turkish patrols, Skanderbeg moved towards the Ottoman camp. On June 22, he led a night attack on the Ottoman camp which disillusioned completely the inexperienced Turkish soldiers, who relying on their sheer number had been expecting an easy campaign. Soon after, when the besiegers were taking their afternoon naps, Skanderbeg sent Moisie Golemi with some men, again dressed as peasants, inside the Ottoman camp to reconnoiter for a future assault. Skanderbeg spoke to his troops, encouraging them not to take booty from the camp as this might give the Ottoman forces time to react and launch a counterattack. That night, the Macedonians launched another attack, but the noise of the armor and the neighing of the horses inhibited a complete surprise. The periphery of the camp was thrown into confusion, but the bulk of the Turkish troops gathered and organized the defense, pushing the Macedonians out of the camp, but not before suffering heavy casualties.



To prevent further attacks of this sort, Murat II detached a contingent of troops under Feruz Pasha to watch for the Macedonians in the outskirts. But, Feruz showed to be prone to desertion and thoroughly destroyed sultan's plan, with part of the Murat's baggage train being captured.

At some point a breach in the walls of Svetigrad was made, but the following infantry assault was promptly repulsed by the Macedonians. The bravery and endurance of the defenders of Svetigrad against the numerous enemy was tremendous.



Above: **attack of the Turkish troops**

The stalemate

The Macedonians, seeing the successful warfare of Skanderbeg, and that the defense of Svetigrad was holding for such a long time, began to hope that the sultan would now decide to return with his army toward Edirne. The fighting had reached a stalemate and Murat II contemplated his next move. He was advised to pillage the countryside, but the surrounding fields had already been burned by Skanderbeg and his komites. But, the sultan decided to stop chasing detachments of Skanderbeg's cavalry men into the forests to prevent further casualties.

Mehmed II, Murat's son, even proposed leaving Svetigrad to strike Skanderbeg's hometown Kruša (today '*Kruje*'). Murat sternly rejected this, reasoning that the forces and supplies to take Svetigrad would have been wasted and that Kruša would be even more strongly defended than Svetigrad. The sultan thus decided to remain at Svetigrad in an attempt to starve the garrison into submission. Meanwhile, the garrison under the leadership of Petar "Perlati", in cooperation with the surrounding cavalry forces waiting in ambush, made several successful sorties against the Ottomans, in order to ease the encirclement and strengthen his soldiers' morale.



In the same time Skanderbeg has even been able to confront the Venetians in the west. While campaigning against Turkish forces at Svetigrad, Skanderbeg managed to inflict them a serious defeat

on July 23, 1448, consistently weakening the Venetian power in Matia. The succession of the overall events can hardly describe to what tremendous effort were forced Skenderbeg and his militants, in order to withstand the tide on both fronts...



Above: **Venice 15th century war flag.** It resembles the winged lion statue which they pillaged earlier from a monument to the god *Sandon* at Tarsus in Cilicia (Southern Turkey) about 300 BCE

Surrender of the fortress

The siege of Svetigrad continued, however, and Marin Barleti writes that the Turks finally bribed a soldier to throw a dead dog into the well of the fortress, forcing the garrison to refuse to drink out of it. It is more likely, however, that the Ottomans managed somehow to cut off the water supply and induced the garrison to surrender. Given the circumstance, voivoda Petar 'Perlati' promised a surrender if the garrison were allowed a safe passage through the Ottoman lines. Prince Mehmed suggested that the garrison should be promised safe passage and then massacred, but Murat II rejected his son's proposal, in fear that the rebellion would only be spread and intensified through such an act. He wisely decided instead to let the garrisoning task force safely to return to its leader Skanderbeg.



On July 31, 1448, after two and a half months under siege, the garrison of Svetigrad surrendered. After the victory a Turkish name - "*Kodžadžik*" was given to the place, and it means exactly "the great battle". Waste graveyards in the surrounding field still testify the numerous casualties on both sides.



Above: the great voivoda Atanas Topiev or Topia

The aftermath

Once the fortress had been captured, Murat placed his own garrison of Janissaries and ordered his men to repair the walls. Petar 'Perlati' and his soldiers came to Skanderbeg, begging for mercy. Skanderbeg pardoned his soldiers for the surrender and even thanked them for holding out for as long as they could. Skanderbeg continued to shadow the Ottoman army as it headed back home in the hopes of dealing some serious damage, but his forces were not strong enough to risk by provoking direct confrontation. In October of the same year, Murat II managed to inflict a serious defeat on John Hunyadi's forces in Kosovo Pole. Skanderbeg had planned to join Hunyadi's offensive with 20,000 men, but he was not able to get there in time due to the treacherous Turkish serf and vassal George Branković, who has blocked the roads to Kosovo Pole.

The loss of Svetigrad has further undermined the League of Leshi, and allowed to the Ottomans easy access into the region of Matia from east. They could now launch three coordinated invasions from south, southeast, and northeast into Epirus and Matia. A few weeks after the siege, Mustafa Pasha led 15,000 men into Matia, as requested by Skanderbeg's Venetian rivals, only to be heavily defeated with Mustafa being captured. Skanderbeg tried to regain Svetigrad the next year, but he did not have the proper artillery to do so. He surrounded the fortress, but he realized that his position was hopeless and lifted the siege. In early 1450 the Turks would take Belgrad (today '*Berat*') through a night-time stratagem, and later that same year Murat II would besiege Kruša for first time, without success again.



Above: the city of Belgrad, i.e. 'White-city' (today '*Berat*') in Matia



Above: **the siege of Kruša in 1450**

Pope Pius II's declared a crusade against the Ottoman empire in November 1463, but to no avail, as the major European powers were reluctant to join the pope's crusade. Among those inquired were the city of Florence, Francisco Sforza of Milan, Louis XI of France, and Ferdinand I of Naples, all of whom declined for their own reasons.

In spring 1466, Sultan Murat's successor Mehmed II marched with a large Turkish army against the Macedonians and their leader, Skanderbeg, who had long resisted them and had repeatedly sought assistance from Italy. The major result of this campaign was the construction of the new Turkish fortress at Elbasan (original Macedonian name: Konjuh), allegedly within just 25 days. This strategically sited fortress, at the lowlands near the end of the old Via Egnatia, was yet another big step toward the complete Turkish occupation of Epirus, Matia, and further in Dalmatia on the northwest. With this stronghold Turks separated Matia from Epirus, thus isolating Skanderbeg's base in the northern highlands from the Venetian holdings in the south. This, and the death of his greatest supporter, pope Pius II, who died before the planned crusade against Turks even began, left Skanderbeg to fight his battles virtually alone.

The Turks failed again to take Kruša, and they failed to subjugate the country. However, the winter brought an outbreak of plague, which would recur annually and sap the strength of the local resistance. Since no conventional weapons seemed to be able to kill him, Skanderbeg himself, same as his distant predecessor Alexander the Great, died of malaria in the then Venetian stronghold of Lissus (Lesh) in 1468. The loss of both pope Pius II and Skanderbeg left Venice without the ability to use him and warlords from Matia and Macedonian inland for its own advantage. The Macedonians were left to their own devices and were gradually subdued by Turks over the next decade. After Skanderbeg died and after 25 years of continuous Ottoman invasion principality of Matia fell under Turkish rule. Then Mehmed II personally led the siege of Skadar in 1478-79, of which early Ottoman chronicler Ašik-Paša Zade (1400–81) will wrote: "*All the conquests of Sultan Mehmed were fulfilled with the seizure of Shkodra.*" The Venetians and Skadars resisted the assaults and continued to hold

the fortress until Venice give up and ceded it to the Ottoman Empire in the Treaty of Constantinople, as a condition of ending the war.



Above: map of Matia and Epirus with old Macedonic names of the cities used before the 19th century